English 11 Andrea Dossantos

The Biography of Shirley Jackson

Middletown High School

Mental illness is defined as “any disease of the mind; the psychological state of someone who has emotional or behavioral impairments of the normal cognitive functioning... (Mental Illness, n/d). With a strong interest in the mind and the mental illness, Shirley Jackson wrote stories that more often than not bewildered, "disturbed", "disrupted", and sometimes "angered" her audiences (Carpenter, 2003). What seperated Jackson from the rest was that she was "an absolute original... a member of no movement, 'no school'...she was unique...(School of One, 1965).

Shirley Jackson was born on December 14, 1919 in San Francisco, California, into a socially well off family (Shirley, 1992). From an early age Jackson openly rebelled against restrictions put on women in her social class (Shirley, 1992). Her mother, Geraldine, tried to make an honest woman out of Shirley but sadly to no avail (Shirley, 1992). She was always with her brother or writing which her mother detested (Shirley, 1992). In 1933, Jackson and her family moved to Rochester, New York, where Jackson attends both the University of Rochester and Syracuse University (Friedman, 1975).

“Jackson is remembered for her gothic fiction or psychological thrillers…writers of gothic fiction have rarely held a secure place in literary fiction…worse…she was a humorist as well…(Carpenter, 2003)”. What distinguishes Jackson from other gothic fiction writers is her ability to mix horror and humor (Carpenter, 2003). Not only does she add in her own “comedic” elements, Jackson isn’t afraid to disturb, disrupt or even anger her audiences (Carpenter, 2003). She does this by using already known themes in a whole new light (Friedman, 1975, p.44). Jackson is able to create a whole new world, away from the pressures of the outside world, away from the problems of ecology and population growth (Friedman, 1975, p.44). Jackson is gifted when it come to leaving the reader with “…an uncertainty that is the characteristic of the reaction to events in many of the stories” (Friedman, 1975, p.46).

Jackson has written many short stories and novels. She wrote about evil cloaked in seeming good, prejudice and hypocrisy, loneliness and frustration, psychological studies of minds that have slipped bonds of reality, studies of persons subjected to suspense and terror and the humorous helplessness of parents in the inevitable crises of family living (Friedman, 1975, p.44). These themes may not be new but the way Jackson portrays them often is (Friedman, 1975, p.44). Jackson’s “…primary purpose was to entertain…” (Friedman, 1975, p.44).

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